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ABSTRACT

When people seek to augment their reading and writing skills through participation in adult literacy programs, what do they expect to happen? An examination of brochures promoting adult literacy programs both nationally and in Philadelphia indicates that the programs promote adult literacy instruction as empowering learners and rescuing them from unemployment and a poor quality of life. In interviews with 13 adult learners, the learners expressed the belief that literacy would give them more control over their daily lives. Some respondents viewed literacy primarily as a strategy for social acceptance and economic success. Several expected immediate advancement from a few months of participation in literacy programs. Discussions with 5 focus groups and 12 adult learners netted comments about the enablement, self-determination, and power that came from literacy. Respondents discussed increased self-esteem, the conquering of shyness, or the satisfaction of a task completed. Some participants saw literacy as a skill necessary for survival, not just transformation. One complained that the literacy programs chose learners they could portray as victims as representatives to conferences. Instead, it appears that adult learners' self-determination (a kind of empowerment) leads to their participation in literacy programs, rather than the reverse. (Forty-two references are attached.) (SG)

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No Pitiful Stories:
Looking at the Relationship between
Adult Literacy Programs and Empowerment

by

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I. Introduction

When people talk about their motivations for joining literacy programs, they speak of wanting to be able to help their children with homework, read books for enjoyment, handle their finances, fill out job applications, and deal with other tasks of daily life. In addition to these specific goals, learners often have a broader agenda: they expect not only their reading and writing skills, but the rest of their lives, to improve dramatically.

Such expectations are not merely a matter of wishful thinking; they are a part of popular culture in the United States, where many believe that literacy skills are essential for economic and political participation, and that their absence is responsible, to some degree, for society's problems. The promotional leaflets and advertisements of many adult literacy programs share this view, promising would-be students significant increases in their abilities and sweeping changes in their lives, often designated by terms like "control," "confidence" and "empowerment." But what enables people whose access to the communication arena has been limited by their literacy skills? How is such a phenomenon experienced? How is it manifested?

This paper offers a preliminary examination of the relationship between adult literacy programs and empowerment. It asks: when people seek to augment their reading and writing skills, what do they expect to happen? Through participation in literacy programs, do they achieve a greater sense of control over their lives? How is this control observed? How can the experiences of adult learners be systematically presented and theoretically understood?

The qualitative data presented here are excerpts from personal and group interviews conducted in 1989 and 1990; also included, as evidence of the claims made by providers, are excerpts from the promotional materials of several national and local literacy agencies. The evidence suggests a correlation between enablement and the social networks offering reading and writing instruction to adults; however, it does not allow us to conclude that literacy programs *create* empowerment.

In studio films like "Stanley and Iris," made-for-TV movies like "Faking It," and the popular press, adult learners are often described through what one student called "pitiful stories" - tales of thwarted, disadvantaged lives dramatically altered by the acquisition of literacy. But the respondents of this study do not tell "pitiful stories;" instead, they describe uses of skills dictated by complex habits and lifestyles. Though some literacy agencies encourage student speakers to tell "pitiful stories" at budget hearings and other public occasions, this study suggests that the individual changes wrought by participation in literacy programs are both less dramatic than images found in popular culture, and less transformative than the students themselves expect.

II. A Look at the Literature

Colin Lankshear's observation that discussions of communication competence generally reflect "the way life has been, and is being, constructed historically within a society (p. 135)" informs this literature review. For the purposes of discussion, the term "literacy" is used herein to refer to social practices based on texts. While traditional approaches to literacy research attempt to isolate the developmental effects of reading and writing skills alone,

more recent work such as that of Sylvia Scribner and Michael Cole (1981), Arlene Fingeret (1983), Shirley Brice-Heath (1983), Brian Street (1984), Jenny Cook-Gumperz (1986) and others, asserts that literacy is socially constructed and must be considered in its particular social context. The latter view informs this study, which is based solely on the attributes of adult learning programs surveyed in the city of Philadelphia.

It is not surprising that contemporary literacy programs and their students link reading and writing with power. Notions of the transformative powers of the word, or what Lee Soltow and Edward Stevens (1981) call the "ideology of literacy," have been part of popular culture in the United States since the middle of the 19th century (p. 85). Rooted in the Enlightenment tradition and extended by the rise of industrial capitalism in the mid-1800s, this ideology carried the notion that "being literate was part of being good, that the unlettered person was clearly considered to be in a state of deprivation (p. 85)." Support for mass schooling during this period grew from the expectation that widespread literacy would forge a nation of intelligent, cultured, well-behaved citizens. This same ideology persists today: despite high national rates of unemployment, homelessness, and poverty attributable to various socioeconomic causes, literacy is still seen as a transcendent force enabling immigrants, minorities, and the poor to enter the national earning and spending mainstream. Reading and writing are seen as transformative agents that ensure economic and social achievement.

Popular culture also links literacy to political participation. Eighteenth-century Jeffersonian notions of an educated, informed electorate are basic to the nation's political ideals, underpinning the principles of representative democracy. This supposed connection between literacy and democracy may be one of our most unexamined shared meanings; but while it may be disputed whether today's voters do in fact participate in a representative democracy or make autonomous political decisions, it is clear that sociopolitical activity still hinges on literacy. The discriminatory literacy tests which once restricted the voting privileges of minorities have been outlawed, but the legislative and judicial codes framing our basic civil rights continue to be written in dense, highly formalized prose. To protect those rights, a citizen of the United States today must be conversant with the literacy standards of the powerful, or financially able to hire someone who is.

By examining the assumptions linking literacy to social status and political power, Richard Ohmann (1985) shows literacy to be "an activity of social groups...like every other human activity or product, it embeds social relations within it. (p. 685)" Carolyn Marvin (1988) reminds us that communities "use literacy, as they use other cultural codes, to negotiate power, authority, representation, and knowledge. Notions of 'correct' literate performance are a product of contests for cultural dominance (p. 65)."

Adult reading programs in the United States offer sites to observe some of the social contexts of literacy. In the most traditional of these programs, as in some basic skills and GED classes (aimed at the successful achievement of a high school equivalency certificate), reading and writing are seen as socially neutral skills. At the other end of the philosophical spectrum are liberatory or collaborative learning programs, which maintain that literacy is socially constructed and can be used to create political consciousness. Michael R. Fox (1986) cautions, however, that literacy should not be expected to bear the full

burden of restructuring an inequitable society: "It is unrealistic to assume that teaching someone to read will help that person get off welfare, find a job, or even read government forms better...simply 'teaching people to read' may not be the most useful way to deal with low literacy (p. 1)."

Although it is adult learners who can best describe what, if anything, they get out of participation in literacy programs, they are not always included in the discussion. Elite standards for communication often govern this dialectic, even among those who would promote liberatory models. Shirley Brice Heath (1986) says that studies which include the expressions of learners are critical to research because they "provide data on the range of types of social and cultural environments that facilitate or restrict the development of factors such as talk about language and institutional supports for literacy (p. 227)."

Learners' accounts can also contribute to the development of new measures of textual practice. Traditional methods for observing and measuring human interactions based on the written word are often grounded in the view of literacy as a set of "neutral," easily quantifiable skills; Lytle, Brandt and Vannozzi (1988) argue that such tests deny the existence of cultural differences and are biased in favor of social elites. It is hoped that the comments of adult learners presented here may contribute to new ways of looking at literate practice and its effects.

III. Methodology

The promotional materials cited here as evidence of popular views of literacy were gathered from local and national adult literacy programs and promotional efforts. The qualitative data of the study comes from two series of interviews. The first sessions, which took place in 1989, explored how 13 adult learners defined literacy and asked what they expected to experience through their participation in literacy programs. The second sessions, conducted in 1990 with five focus groups and 12 individuals, asked adult learners to describe their own concepts of empowerment and self-determination, and focused on whether these concepts related to their experiences in literacy programs. All sessions involved participants in adult literacy programs located in the city of Philadelphia; all were conducted with the permission of program administrators and through the voluntary, uncompensated participation of the respondents.

The six public agencies participating in this study all offered pedagogies aimed at developing the student's scholastic skills; all contained, in curricula and organizational structures, some form of implied or explicit ideology capable of influencing an individual's self-consciousness; and all involved supportive personal contacts which may promote communication behavior in social relationships. Together, these three types of behavior may improve the learner's communication competence, and may lead to a sense of empowerment. This hypothetical process is illustrated in the model following.

Pedagogy	**Skills**		
		Improved	
Ideology	**Consciousness**	**Communication Competence**	**Empowerment**
	Relationships		
Socialization			

This study is limited in that short-term observation is not suited to distinguishing between existing behaviors and new ones. The cross-sectional findings here are intended to serve as exploratory tests of the utility of the described theoretical concepts, not "proofs" of them. The aims and mechanisms of the study were made explicit to the participants, and changed to reflect their criticisms and creative suggestions, but were still shaped and controlled by the author. Participation was entirely self-selected, and the effects described entirely self-reported. Responses may have been influenced by social interaction between the researcher and adult learners, and between learners and literacy program administrators, whose approval/disapproval was manifested in some situations. It should also be noted that this study does not make claims about the effectiveness of adult literacy programs in general or in specific.

IV. Findings - Great Expectations

In order to attract funding and the student populations they need in order to survive, adult learning programs seek to influence public attitudes about the need for their services and the beneficial effects of learning to read and write. The brochures, press kits and other materials cited below use two approaches to influence adult learners, volunteers and donors: they offer hope of personal and social change, stemming from new levels of reading and writing ability, or they predict a looming dystopia where literacy is the only protection against rampant unemployment, drug use, and violence in the streets. Empowerment is presented either as the positive ability to advance oneself in society or the negative ability to protect oneself from harm.

While these written messages may not be consumed directly by illiterate populations, they contribute to a cultural climate of opinion in which reading and writing are seen to be forces which give people power over their own destinies. As such, they provide evidence for asserting that popular culture associates empowerment and literacy. Some participants in this study said they had been urged to learn to read by family members who had seen such advertisements or other promotional materials; others had some reading ability and had read such items themselves.

In Philadelphia, the Mayor's Commission on Literacy promises that literacy tutoring will help "unemployed, underemployed, career displaced and new residents...into the mainstream of our City and improve the quality of their lives." A brochure directed at corporate citizens claims that a learning program based at the workplace will convert the "untapped human resource" of non-reading employees into "a productive human resource" (emphasis in brochure).

One of the largest literacy providers in the city, The Center for Literacy, assures people that "Learning to read and write changes lives. Reading adults can find and hold productive jobs, enjoy books and newspapers, and help their children learn. Readers participate in community activities, and feel more self-confident and self-sufficient." Organization newsletters quote satisfied students and enthusiastic tutors, one of whom preaches, "By learning to read and write, people can become full members of our democracy. They gain a fair share of the political power that you and I take for granted." A student gushes, "I feel like a bud that's blossomed into a little flower."

A brochure from the Germantown Women's Education Project tells potential students it offers "education to help YOU take more control of your life." In its annual report, the agency states, "our philosophy is that education can truly effect social change when it is carried on in a community in which every person involved participates equally in deciding upon our educational goals." A brochure from The Women's School of West Philadelphia says that its goal is "to empower women by providing a supportive environment for women of all ages, races, classes and sexual orientation: to learn new skills, to meet other women, to gain self-confidence, to understand more about ourselves, to create self-respect."

Dystopic visions are also plentiful in the literature disseminated by programs. "The Numbers Are Frightening!," warns the literature of the Chapter Two Reading Program of the Metropolitan Philadelphia Family of YMCAs. "Over 200,000 area adults cannot read or write... The written word means nothing to them. It's difficult to believe that such a senseless waste of human potential actually exists right here in our community; yet, it does." The agency solicits volunteer tutors by promising them nothing less than a role in staving off the total collapse of society. "Each year that goes by, reading skills continue to decline while the standards for literacy keep rising," the brochure warns. "By the year 2000, the average person with three grandchildren could find that two of them are considered illiterate. Before that America comes to be, you can stop it."

Nationally disseminated materials are also influential in framing the public's expectations of empowerment through literacy. Some of these materials are seen in popular media (TV commercials and movies such as the recently released "Stanley and Iris," in which a man's life is radically transformed by literacy in less than a year), while others are circulated by libraries and volunteer organizations.

First Lady Barbara Bush has adopted literacy as a cause celebre, and her Foundation for Family Literacy produces large amounts of literature, most of it of the alarmist view that literacy staves off anarchy. The nation's literacy needs are "suddenly so varied and pervasive, so vast and severe," that they have become a "very real threat to the nation's economic future and the American way of life," one brochure reads. Mrs. Bush shares her convictions that "most of our nation's serious social, economic, and political problems are linked to the difficulty that too many Americans have in reading, writing, computing and comprehending... (literacy is) a critical set of tools that can help solve these problems... a person must be literate in order to participate and contribute fully in our society."

The literature produced by Push Literacy Action Now, an agency based in Washington, D.C., offers a modest description of the program's capabilities. But the program's T-shirts bear a powerful symbolic message: a clenched fist clutching a pencil, rising from an open book, bearing the motto, "with literacy and justice for all." The raised fist is a symbol of militancy used since the 1960s; the motto, "with literacy and justice for all," paraphrases a line from the Pledge of Allegiance that every schoolchild memorizes. The advertising brochure urges, "If you believe in the connections between literacy and other issues of power in our society, say it out loud with this T-shirt!"

These local and national messages suggest that notions of empowerment through literacy are not simply a result of inflated expectations on the part of adult learners. Rather, the view belongs to a fairly common set of assumptions

contained within a larger framework of cultural attitudes about textual practices. Some of these messages are a part of our "ideology of literacy," absorbed generally through the public school system and popular culture; others have been produced by literacy providers and directed specifically at the population studied here.

IV. Findings - The Learners Speak

Most of the 25 adult learners individually interviewed said they believed that reading and writing programs give people more control over their daily lives. The proposed model suggested that evidence to support this relationship might appear in three avenues of communication behavior: reading and writing ability (skills); an individual's sociopolitical awareness of herself or himself in relation to the larger society (consciousness); and personal social contacts (relationships). Learners' accounts offered evidence that development in these avenues of communication behavior is experienced as empowerment.

In the 1989 interviews, 13 beginning adult learners shared their views of reading and writing in society and also described what they expected to achieve in literacy programs. (Selected excerpts from these interviews appear below. Separate paragraphs come from different individuals.) These opinions, whether influenced by promotional literacy messages or other factors, tended not to be based on personal or practical applications for reading and writing skills. Instead, they emphasized the relational aspects of literacy, seeming to view it primarily as a strategy for social acceptance and economic success.

> People who can read, it make them better socialized. If they have a good education they can better adjust to the public, if they don't have a gift of gab. The more education you have, the more money you earn.

> Reading is good. If you say all your business out then people be getting all in your business. With reading, you don't have to say nothing. This give you the thinking cap right here.

Several people considered themselves fully able despite testing at low reading levels; although they admitted to a lack of literacy skills, they described themselves as possessed of other means to "pick up" all the information they needed for daily life.

> I had what you call mother wit. That's something you born with, where you easily pick up what's going on. I had a lot of experience from being street-educated, from being a corner boy like I was when I was coming up. What you call street-educated, that the most important thing in the world. If you don't have no experience, you don't know nothing.

> If a person can't read, their memory is better because they have to keep more things in their mind.

> Some people just gifted. They can pick up things by watching people. I watch people how they move, how they speak and all; and I pick up stuff from there.

Despite these expressions of ability, people from this group had dramatic expectations of the personal transformations they expected from improving their reading and writing skills. Several anticipated economic success or professional careers as a direct result of a few months of participation in literacy programs.

> The way I want to be living my life, I want to see me living downtown where you buy the houses with marble floors. I want my daughters in college, nice clothes on their bodies. I want a good life. That's why I'm here.

> I want to be a social worker, and to explain things to people, if I understand it by reading articles and different things they don't understand.

> I'm hoping to prove myself to my family and myself. I need something to make myself feel all these years didn't get wasted. I'm not going to be in the ghettoes forever. I'm gone be able to have a house someday, feel good about myself.

These exploratory interviews suggested that beginning adult learners, with little or no experience of the applications of reading and writing, see these skills as a powerful talisman of social status. Literacy, to them, is primarily a tool for social and economic empowerment; it enhances social participation and makes more lucrative employment possible. None of the adults in this group expressed a view of literacy as a means of achieving personal consciousness or enabling political action.

Conducted in 1990, five focus group discussions were used to serve as a conceptual foundation for exploring the relationship between adult literacy programs and empowerment. Participants tended to be active, outspoken students who were curious about the subject of the research question and comfortable talking about themselves to an outsider. Their descriptions of enablement, self-determination, and power-related concepts (solicited by the researcher) varied widely, from "learning how to handle one's problems," to "a feeling of coming out and not being afraid." One student's broad description of "a growing sense of having control over your life" met with general approval and became the second session's working definition of empowerment.

Also in 1990, 12 individual interviews were held with experienced adult learners or graduates of literacy programs. Most of these speakers credited learning programs with leading them to changes in behavior or transformative psychological experiences, such as the growth of self-esteem, the conquering of shyness, or the satisfaction of a task completed.

> In my lifetime it was so many things that I was asked to do and I'd know I couldn't handle it and I'd back off. I would always make an excuse, rather than say I couldn't read well. It was always coming at me, do this and do that and do the other, and I know I have a handicap so I just back off. But now since I been in this program I can do much more. And I do.

> The fact that you faced the challenge and you did it, you didn't shy away from it, makes you so much stronger. You might want to do something you never approached before, I guess you never knew you were smart enough.

Some participants felt that reading, writing and math were necessary basic life skills; the motive for their acquisition was survival, not the hope of transformation. Others found psychological benefits such as increased self-esteem in the pursuit of these skills.

> It's hard in this world. You have to go to school to get your education, or if you don't, you'll be a street person.

> I'm very easy to catch on, all the signs and things I had seen and read, I know them by sight. But it was very difficult to put it down on paper. I do plumbing and electrical work and carpentry work. And filling out forms is very needed, and how to read a ruler. So it was all important that I was able to do this.

> I feel like, when I learn math and reading, that I have more control over myself. It's not like I've never learned this kind of math before. But it's going back and learning the basics over again. And now I have more control in math, I have more confidence.

> It makes you feel good about yourself. You can never create too much knowledge, never. Your whole life you're always in a learning process.

The interview subjects were critically aware of many issues relating to learning programs, such as social contexts of literacy; approaches to pedagogy; student expectations; and power relationships within programs. Students noted the inter-agency competition for attention and funding; one complained that literacy programs often choose learners they can portray as victims when sending representatives to regional literacy conferences or national and local publicity events.

> The one that usually wins is the most pitiful story. People love hearing that. It gets money for programs. The woman that was picked last time, oh, she had been on drugs and everything, she was from a small town, a real pitiful story. In a way it's bad, in a way it's not bad, because it's all for one purpose, making literacy, making people know out there, the real life, we call it.

Other participants debated the relative value of literacy in a society troubled by numerous other problems, stressing the need for comprehension and judgment as well as skills.

> Just reading and writing, that's not enough. As we often see, people sometimes don't use what they have to any advantage. Like the drug people, the people on drugs, some of those people are well educated. So it's not always whether they can read. You should be able to deal with discernment, have the ability to reason things for yourself and not have other people control you.

Students critiqued the instructional methods used by their programs. One pointed out that students often have unrealistic expectations of the time it will take them to achieve their goals, and felt that program staff should counteract such inflated hopes.

> Some people get disappointed because they think they're going to get their GED in no time. And it doesn't happen that way. It takes years and years to go to high school and get a certain grade, and you're not going to get it in a year, you're not going to get it in two years. It's an ongoing thing.

Students acknowledged the importance of the social aspects of literacy programs; they described friendships with teachers or tutors, a sense of affirmation from getting together with other students, and new confidence in speaking to strangers.

> I'm doing something I never thought I would ever do. I've always been involved in neighborhood work, I was always involved in school work with the PTA, 'cause I'm sort of a joiner, I like people. But I never thought that I would be teaching and taking on all the responsibility of (a community education) project.

> Being able to start to understand things differently and be able to feel like I can express myself a little bit better, I took it one step further with the (cable) company. I called up and I said, look, this is wrong, I have all my mail here to prove that you're wrong, what you're saying to me. I don't think I would have done that before, I don't think I would have had the nerve.

To some, the literacy program seemed to provide as strong a personal identity as that derived by many people from their jobs or families. Seeing themselves as students or as members of a learning program gave these students a sense of belonging.

> I wasn't working at the time and when I got involved in the program, I was practically there all the time. I really had nowhere to go. It was like going somewhere that people were helping me, they were like a bunch of friends.

> I come out because I don't have anything else to do. I'm always in somebody's classroom, it's hard to stay home. This summer I had a class in my home every week for children, I had tutoring class. I'm not charging them nothing, I mean, I want company, to tell you the truth.

Overall, most participants discussed empowerment as an individual rather than collective experience, and as a personal rather than social phenomenon. Some believed that their participation in literacy programs was giving them a "growing sense of more control over their lives."

> Before I joined I was just a housewife, I didn't care about nothing else. And I never thought that was bad, that was just the way I wanted to be. Now I see, hey, I can be something if I really put myself to it. I'm doing this and it's not taking me as long as I thought it would. I feel special now, or better. I stuck it out finally, and it's getting me somewheres too.

Others felt that no change had occurred in their lives as a result of the involvement. After graduation, one said,

> Life went on about the same as usual. I moved into middle management after I graduated, at the pharmacy - I'm a pharmacy technician, I manage a store - but I don't really think it had anything to do with my education. I would have done it anyway.

V. Analysis

No matter at what levels they may "test," Francis E. Kazemek notes (1988), most adults raised in the United States have attended public school and have been exposed to reading and writing pedagogies. In addition, home and social life, popular culture and everyday activities teach and reinforce certain kinds of practices involving the use of texts. Thus, adult learning programs cannot be considered a dynamic first exposure to the world of written communication, but should be seen as a set of social structures centered around personal and social literate practices. These structures, Kazemek asserts, may be empowering when

they stimulate the use of reading and writing for "intelligent, meaningful and humane action upon the world (p. 480)."

When the learners quoted in this paper describe their "growing sense of having control over your own life," does that mean they have experienced empowerment? The influential Brazilian theorist Paulo Freire would not think so. His view analyzes literacy education "according to whether it serves to reproduce existing social formation or serves as a set of cultural practices that promotes democratic and emancipatory change (p. 156)." To some literacy providers, the word empowerment carries specific connotations of political consciousness, social mobilization, and democratic participation. This view is more common in agencies which structure themselves around the needs of particular communities; these programs often explicitly pursue Freirian values of "solidarity, social responsibility, creativity, discipline in the service of the common good, vigilance, and critical spirit (p. 156)."

In more traditional programs, where literacy is offered as a neutral set of skills and progress is attributed to the skills themselves, the promoted vision of success promotes employment within the capitalist marketplace. The society itself, whose structure and values presently exclude non-readers from its benefits, is not routinely examined in such programs. But political awareness may develop here too; Street points out that even in traditional programs, educators spend a lot of time "establishing what particular literacy practice individuals are interested in or "need," and this inevitably involves some analysis of their social position and of the social context within which that practice has relevance (p. 219)."

The definitions of empowerment offered by participants in this study were largely personal ones. Few speakers identified changes in their skills, consciousness or relationships which related directly to "democratic and emancipatory change" of the larger society. Learners believed that their experiences had led them to valuable personal development, but only those students who became teachers themselves felt actively involved in social change. The more modest definitions offered by the rest of the respondents had to do with beginnings, with possibilities. In a society where individual achievement is seen as the ultimate form of success, Freirian values such as collectivism, cooperation and political engagement may be slower to grow, and their development harder to trace.

In this study, the self-reported uses of literacy skills, the types of awareness displayed, and the social relationships discussed, tended to follow established patterns of personal behavior. Thus, individuals who described themselves as solitary or shy tended to report uses of reading for personal goals, like buying a new brand of shampoo at the drugstore or understanding a mystery novel; they developed no friendships which continued outside of class, and reported no changes in family or community relationships. "Shy" learners believed that involvement in literacy programs *could* lead to empowerment, but as one student said, "it depends on the person. It's on you, what you do with it."

On the other hand, outgoing individuals tended to incorporate communication behaviors stimulated by literacy programs into their already dynamic social lives, and used these skills and attitudes when engaging with others. Reports of literacy-related mobilization came from "joiners," people who said they had a high degree of personal involvement in social groups before

enrolling in a learning program. The students who had become teachers, speakers for literacy programs, or leaders of student groups, all spoke of a past propensity to take part in group activities. These people were more likely to look upon literacy skills as strategies for solving problems in their daily lives, and to initiate contacts with others as a way of meeting their needs. They also tended to be more vocal about the relationship between self-determination and literacy, and to encourage others to participate in adult learning programs.

VI. Conclusions

The adults interviewed here believed that involvement with literacy programs was transforming them and increasing their control over their own lives. Their accounts offer evidence supporting the model that the communication behavior components of literacy programs are associated with the experience of empowerment. Some of the adults who spoke here attribute this power to the skills of reading and writing; some said they had developed new awareness of their own potential; others described the blossoming of new cooperative relationships as a source of strength.

This study is not structured to support a claim that participation in adult literacy programs *creates* empowerment. By the time some adults decide to enter a literacy program, their desire for self-determination is already strong. Perhaps the kinds of enablement they describe here - improved reading and writing skills, increased awareness and new social relationships - might also be stimulated by joining a social club, a neighborhood committee, or a political campaign. Such possibilities are outside the scope of this study, but they do suggest that, while learners' accounts support an inference of a correlation between empowerment and adult literacy programs, such self-reports do not support conclusions of causality. Indeed, empowerment may facilitate participation in literacy programs, rather than the reverse.

However, the study does lend support to notions of correlation between adult learning programs and empowerment, and suggests that analysis of the literate and social practices of these institutions may be fruitfully pursued in a communication context. Respondents' descriptions of enablement associated with literacy in several Philadelphia programs may illuminate future studies of communication competence.

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